

Weston Pass Auto Tour

Road of Dreams, the Miner's Turnpike

This series of auto tours crosses through National Forest lands and private landowners.

Some of the historic mining sites may contain mine shafts and other dangerous mine workings, most of which are on private land. Visitors should exercise caution when leaving their vehicles.

This 16-mile tour begins 11 miles south of Fairplay on U.S. 285 where it crosses the South Fork of the South Platte River.

CHRONOLOGY-WESTON PASS
1803 - Louisiana Territory, land west of Mississippi, purchased by the U.S.
1806 - Gold in South Park reported to Zebulon Pike
1805-40- Mountain men and fur trappers in South Park
1849 - California gold rush
1858-59 - Depressed economy after Panic of 1857 sent gold-seekers west
1859 - Colorado gold rush; major find on Tarryall Creek and Blue River
1860-63 - Placer mining peak in South Park and California Gulch
1862 - Territorial Legislature authorized toll road over Weston Pass
1867 - End of large-scale placer mining on small claims
1870s - Colorado silver rush; lode mining in Alma and Leadville areas
1877-79 - Leadville silver rush
1878-80 - Weston toll road's busiest period
1878-80 - Nathaniel Rich operated Weston Pass toll road
1879-89 - \$82 million worth in silver taken from Leadville
1879 - Denver, South Park and Pacific Railroad reached South Park and the town of Weston
1880 - Railroad reached Leadville via Arkansas Valley; traffic on Weston Pass declines
1891 - Gold found in Cripple Creek
1892 - South Platte Forest Reserve created
1905 - U.S. Forest Service created within the Department of Agriculture
1907- Pike National Forest evolved from South Platte Forest Reserve

1. The Road to Riches

This is a historic crossroads known locally as Twin Bridges. Wagon roads from all four directions met near here to form an early day version of a freeway interchange. Long before the wagons and bridges, Native Americans traveled here as well. Gold seekers were quick to adopt the Indians' well-worn trails, one of which became Weston Pass Road. An 1860 gold strike at California Gulch (just south of present-day Leadville) gave rise to the first wagon road. It climbed to the headwaters of the South Fork of the South Platte, and on over the 12,109' Weston Pass toward the upper Arkansas Valley.

2. The Forest, a Blessing, Then & Now

The ranch buildings to the right (old log ones still among them) are on a tract first patented in 1881. Those early settlers needed building materials for their homes and outbuildings. The vast forests of conifers such as those on your left provided for a great many material needs of the pioneers, and much-needed income as well. By 1872, there was at least one sawmill nearby to serve the needs of ranchers and towns such as Fairplay. The mining era saw a huge demand for lumber, cordwood, ties, and charcoal. The steam-powered sawmills whined well into the 20th century, processing enormous amounts of timber. The cutting was overdone sometimes, but there was not a great amount of permanent damage in this area. Nature has renewed most of the old cutting areas near here. When used carefully as a truly renewable resource, our splendid forests will continue to be a national treasure of beauty and bounty.

In 1860, Algernon S. Weston traveled by ox team across the plains from Kansas, joining experienced prospectors from the declining California gold rush and First-time hopefuls from the East and Midwest. After a mining stint, Weston settled into a career as a lawyer; and he also acquired a ranch in Lake County along the Weston Pass Road. He rose to become a judge and a State Senator.

In 1859, Philo M. Weston came to Colorado, arriving in South Park in 1861. He purchased the 480-acre ranch claim that straddled California Gulch Toll Road (soon to be known as the Weston Pass); and later bought another 160-acre claim near the Twin Bridges area. By 1862, he and his wife Mary had a roadside hotel, probably on his larger property. After an 1860 location farther west, the toll gate may have been moved to or near that property as well. In 1867, he sold the 480-acre claim and moved to Lake County, and then to Chaffee County.

So here we have the two Westons, one a prominent citizen and another who had a direct business association with our road.

3. No Pay, No Way

This tour stop is within Philo Weston's 1861 ranch claim. The toll gate then and for the next few years may have been located up the valley no more than a quarter-mile from here. (The toll road ran up the valley ahead, unlike the current route, which will shortly veer to the right and away from the toll route for several miles.) Sharp eyes or a pair of binoculars can pick out a set of old buildings at the end of the valley meadow ahead. They are at the Weston Pass Ranch, site of the toll gate at the time of the Leadville rush, and known then as Platte Station. The gatekeeper was Nathaniel (Nat) Rich. He and his wife Loretta were '59ers whose varied lives also included such activities as trade with the Ute's and mining. When the toll traffic ended in 1880, Nat bought the Platte Station site and homesteaded more land to establish the Weston Pass Ranch, where he and Loretta remained for some years.

4. Beacons in the Distance

Looming ahead are the rounded summits of the 13,000' Buffalo Peaks. Formed by volcanic action long after the Mosquito Range uplift, they mark the western edge of the 39 Mile Volcano Belt. Before there were roads to South Park, early gold rushers using the Santa Fe Trail would head north along Fountain Creek. As Pikes Peak came into view, they continued northwest up the creek and over Ute Pass, and then used Buffalo Peaks as a landmark as they entered South Park. The Buffalo Peaks area is known for its fine wildlife habitat, including a herd of bighorn sheep, Colorado's magnificent State animal. The Buffalo Peaks are the centerpiece of the Buffalo Peaks Wilderness Area. Congress thus joins many who know it well and recognize the uniqueness of the Buffalo Peaks country.

5. Leave It to Beaver

In the early 1800's French trappers and their American counterparts, the mountain men, had come to South Park seeking their fortunes. Beaver pelts, however, not gold, shaped their quest. By 1833, Bent's Fort had become a major trading hub for the shipment of furs to eastern markets. A decade later, silk replaced felt as the fashion standard for hats, saving the beaver and the watershed lands they inhabited and shaped. Beaver dams, such as those ahead on the left, slow spring runoff, trap eroded sediments, promote willow growth and regulate the release of water into the drainage, creating productive fisheries and wildlife habitat.

The new state and county governments in the early West had no fund reserves and little tax base to finance public improvements such as roads. Private companies were thus allowed, even encouraged, to build roads. They profited (sometimes) on their investments by collecting

tolls for the use of the roads. A crude toll road was built over Weston Pass as early as the summer of 1860. At least 3 different toll companies operated the road over the next 20 years. The early 1860's saw some busy times for the tollway, but nothing like the hordes that raced for Leadville after the 1877 silver strike.

6. Rush Hour, 1879

Today, we look from here upon a largely empty Weston Pass Road as it snakes its way toward the summit. The same view in the summer of 1879 was clouded by the fog of dust raised by an unbroken stream of wagons, stages, and animals. Indeed, for about a two-year period during 1878-79, this road may well have been the busiest in all of Colorado. As the Denver, South Park and Pacific Railroad built toward Leadville in 1879, end-of-track was at the wild tent town of Weston, several miles east of Twin Bridges. From there, the Wall & Witter Company alone sent 7 stagecoaches and 11 freight wagons each day to conquer Weston. On September 4, 1879, 225 teams were counted as they crossed the summit. On the steeper, narrow sections of the road, literal traffic jams were the order of the day; and bloody stage crashes were not uncommon.

7. Clara's Kitchen

During 1879, Park County issued liquor licenses to at least 8 establishments along this road between end-of-track at Weston and the top of the Pass. One of those was located on the small side drainage ahead. It was an eatery and stage stop known as "Park Place," which catered to ravenous travelers enduring the bumpy trip over the Pass. One customer in May of 1879 was Charles Dow, a well-off New Yorker later to become the father of the Dow-Jones Stock Market Index. He described Clara Davidson's table thus: "The dinner was excellent. It lacked the style of the Narragansett, but there was great variety and good quality." Mrs. Davidson shortly sold the place to another woman. Among the property conveyed were a couple of cows and no fewer than 13 pigs. Apparently, the table and kitchen scraps were fed to the pigs, who in turn were fed to the customers. There's mighty little we could teach our thrifty and practical ancestors about recycling.

8. Stumps, Scars and Snags

The Engelmann spruce forests did not recover quickly from the timber felling and frequent wildfires that accompanied the rush for gold and silver. Near the summit harsh conditions slow the reestablishment of seedlings and stunt their growth. Decomposition also proceeds slowly here. The stumps, charred snags and scars of exploration that we see today have remained as marks from that period. Lodgepole pines and aspen have filled in pockets where spruce once stood. Today's spruce forest, managed by the Forest Service for

watershed and habitat stability, harbors diverse wildlife populations. The mountain bison have disappeared, but deer, bighorn sheep and elk remain, as do pine martens, weasels, snowshoe hares and bobcats. A variety of voles, mice and small rodents provide food for foxes, coyotes, hawks and owls. Downy, hairy and three-toed woodpeckers feed on spruce beetles and several other birds may be commonly seen in these forests: the gray jay, Clark's nutcracker, mountain chickadee, and Swainson's thrush.

9. Final Profits from the Pass

As the dust, clamor and traffic over the Pass subsided, so did potential sources of income for Nathaniel and Loretta Rich. They acquired some high pass property by filing mining claims. In the late 1890's after fortunes had been excavated from the limestone fissures of London Mountain (see Mosquito Pass brochure), promise presented itself wherever similar limestone formations surfaced. Nat Rich explored several of these sites near Weston Pass. Most of the probes were exploratory. This one, the Ruby Mine, now in ruins, probably produced some ore.

10. It's All Downhill from Here

Imagine the relief of the many mules, horses and oxen who finally reached this point after toiling for miles with their heavy wagons and up to 6,000 pounds of freight. Theirs was often a brutal existence; and dead animals were a common sight along this road. Isham & Co.'s summit house was here to meet the needs of those who were thirsty and/or in a mood to celebrate achieving the Summit. What a vista we have toward either the upper Arkansas area and the majestic Sawatch Range, or back toward the massive Buffalo Peaks and vast South Park. Now or over a century ago, those who have stood here are linked by the beauty and promise of this timeless landscape, a gift to us all.

For more information, contact:

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